

PAX NIGERIANA: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF NIGERIA'S POWER PROJECTION ON WEST AFRICAN POLITICAL STABILITY

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(TETF/DESS/UNI/SOKOTO/ARJ/01)

Abstract

Regional stability is usually predicated on the ability of regional hegemons within the geographical area to provide leadership for the entire region. In West Africa, Nigeria by its virtue of population, economic capability and military strength is a hegemon in the West African sub region. Hence, this study investigates Nigeria's regional influence in West Africa, with particular emphasis on its leadership role within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It explores how Nigeria's economic and military power shapes decision-making processes, influences regional stability, and impacts the development trajectory of West African states. The research is driven by the paradox of Nigeria's dominant contributions ranging from peacekeeping and economic support to diplomatic mediation against the backdrop of internal challenges and growing skepticism among member states about its hegemonic posture. The study adopts a qualitative research design, which include indepth interview to gather empirical data. It also utilizes data from secondary sources. Findings reveal that while Nigeria plays a critical role in stabilizing the region and advancing integration goals, its dominance also breeds resistance and calls for more inclusive governance within ECOWAS. The study concludes that Nigeria's leadership remains essential to ECOWAS's functionality, but achieving sustainable regional integration requires balancing national power with collective interests. The study recommends strategic reforms to enhance equitable decision-making, institutional transparency, and cooperative security frameworks across the sub-region.

Keywords: *Pax Nigeriana, Regional Hegemony, ECOWAS, Foreign Policy, Conflict Resolution*

Introduction

The dynamics of power, leadership, and cooperation within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have shaped the political and economic landscape of West Africa for nearly five decades (Nwolise, 2007 and Oshelowo et al., 2023). At the heart of this organization is Nigeria, a country whose sheer size and resources give it a significant influence within the region. This influence has, over time, become both an asset and a source of tension within ECOWAS, as other member states balance the benefits of Nigeria's leadership with concerns about equity, autonomy, and representation. The question of Nigeria's role in ECOWAS is one of ambition, responsibility, and, at times, the unintended consequences of dominance within a regional body designed for cooperation (Bala & Tar, 2021). Nigeria's journey as a regional leader within ECOWAS began not only because of its economic and demographic weight but also due to its historical commitment to regional stability and cooperation. With its vast reserves of oil and natural gas, Nigeria is often referred to as the "Giant of Africa's" and it has been bearing the responsibility to

lead its West African neighbors toward economic and political integration (Ogunnubi & Okeke-Udodike, 2016). The Nigerian economy, with a gross domestic product significantly larger than those of many ECOWAS nations combined, has made Nigeria a primary contributor to the organization's budget. This financial support has enabled ECOWAS to undertake large-scale initiatives, from infrastructural projects to humanitarian efforts, which might not have been possible otherwise (Smart, 2014). But Nigeria's dominance in funding has also raised questions about how decisions are made, and whether smaller states, whose voices may be overshadowed, truly have equal standing within the organization (Bala & Tar, 2021).

The commitment Nigeria has shown to regional security is another defining aspect of its influence in ECOWAS. Over the years, Nigeria has led several peacekeeping missions across West Africa, a role rooted in its political aspirations to prevent regional conflicts and support constitutional governance (Adams, 2024). From the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone to recent interventions in Mali, Nigeria has often contributed the bulk of ECOWAS's peacekeeping forces, putting itself at the forefront of regional security (Obi, 2009). While many West African states have welcomed Nigeria's proactive role, these efforts have also raised complex questions about dependency and sovereignty. On one hand, Nigeria's intervention has often been necessary to bring stability; on the other hand, the reliance on Nigeria for peacekeeping has at times led to a perception that ECOWAS would struggle to function without Nigeria's involvement. For some smaller countries, this dynamic suggests a lopsided power structure, with Nigeria's leadership often setting the agenda on security matters (Anekwe, 2020). Beyond military contributions, Nigeria has positioned itself as a diplomatic leader within ECOWAS, often facilitating critical discussions and policy decisions that shape the region (Kohnert, 2023). Nigerian leaders have historically advocated for democratic values, economic cooperation, and human rights within ECOWAS. Nigeria's role in diplomatic mediation has helped resolve various regional conflicts and supported ECOWAS's agenda of regional integration. Yet, as Nigeria continues to exert its influence, certain tensions have become evident (Kohnert, 2023). For example, some member states may feel that Nigeria's leadership is sometimes self-serving, prioritizing its national interests under the guise of regional cooperation. This sentiment is especially pronounced in situations where Nigeria's policies might indirectly benefit its own economy or political standing, leading to skepticism about whether ECOWAS can remain a balanced forum for all West African nations (Osobdu, 2023).

As Nigeria's economy continues to grow, and as ECOWAS faces new challenges from political instability, economic pressures, and climate-related issues, understanding Nigeria's role within the organization becomes increasingly important. This study, therefore, emerges within a context of both opportunity and uncertainty, seeking to explore not just Nigeria's impact on ECOWAS, but the broader implications for regional cooperation, security, and development across West Africa.

However, limited attention has been given to understanding how Nigeria's dominant role impacts ECOWAS's ability to effectively achieve long-term regional goals, such as economic integration, political stability, and security cooperation. The existing literature tends to overlook the internal dynamics of the organization and the potential challenges posed by Nigeria's central role in decision-making. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding whether Nigeria's leadership strengthens or weakens ECOWAS's cohesion and operational efficiency, particularly as the region grapples with emerging issues like terrorism, political instability, and economic disparities. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Nigeria's leadership dynamics shape the organization's overall effectiveness in achieving its broader regional objectives, with particular focus on the balance between national power and regional cooperation. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. In what ways does Nigeria's economic and military strength influence decision-making within ECOWAS?
- ii. What are the militating factors against Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS?
- iii. How does Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS impact on the organization's effectiveness in achieving regional stability, and development?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Hegemony Theory as the theoretical framework to examine Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS and its influence on regional cooperation and development. The theory was primarily influenced by the works of Antonio Gramsci, who posits that a dominant power not only maintains control through coercion but also through consent, which it fosters by shaping ideologies and institutions. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how Nigeria, as a regional hegemon, shapes the dynamics within ECOWAS by exercising significant control over economic, political, and military matters. The theory provides a robust lens for analyzing the power relations between Nigeria and other ECOWAS member states, emphasizing Nigeria's role in steering policies, ensuring regional security, and influencing economic cooperation across the region. While other theories such as Regionalism theory and Institutionalism theory offer valuable perspectives, they do not fully capture the nuances of power dynamics inherent in Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS. Regionalism Theory, which focuses on the cooperation and integration of states within a particular geographical region, provides insight into the collective efforts of ECOWAS. However, it overlooks the central role that a dominant power like Nigeria plays in driving the regional agenda. Similarly, Institutionalism theory, which emphasizes the structure and functioning of international organizations, can help explain the operational processes of ECOWAS but fails to account for the unequal power distribution within the organization. In contrast, Hegemony theory accounts for the influence and dominance of Nigeria in shaping both the formal and informal structures of ECOWAS.

Hegemony theory is especially pertinent for this study because it captures the asymmetry in the power relations among ECOWAS members. Nigeria, with its considerable military and economic capacity, plays a pivotal role in shaping the regional order. Through both hard power (military interventions and economic leverage) and soft power (diplomatic influence and ideological leadership), Nigeria exercises a hegemonic influence over ECOWAS. This theory allows for a deeper understanding of how Nigeria's actions, whether through peacekeeping missions, economic initiatives, or leadership in policy formation, are not merely the result of institutional cooperation but are rooted in its ability to set the terms of engagement and drive regional decision-making processes. The theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the broader implications of Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS. It illuminates how Nigeria's hegemonic status affects not only regional cooperation and development but also the political and economic stability of West Africa as a whole. By understanding Nigeria's role through this theoretical lens, the study can better explain the dynamics of power, leadership, and regional integration, making Hegemony theory the most fitting framework for addressing the research problem.

Research Data Collection

This study employs a combination of both primary and secondary data sources to explore Nigeria's leadership role within ECOWAS. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of the academic community whose research focuses on West African regional politics and Nigeria's foreign policy. Specifically, four respondents were selected from the

Departments of History, Political Science, and International Relations at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife using purposive sampling method. Their insights provided informed perspectives on Nigeria's influence within ECOWAS, helping to deepen the analysis with current academic discourse and lived experience in the field. In addition to primary data, the study draws heavily on secondary sources such as official ECOWAS publications, academic journals, government policy documents, and reports from international organizations. These materials offer critical background and contextual information necessary for understanding the historical, political, and economic dimensions of Nigeria's engagement in ECOWAS. The integration of both data types allows for a comprehensive and nuanced examination, ensuring that the research findings are grounded in both theoretical understanding and practical insight. The study employs thematic analysis as its data analysis technique, focusing on identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the primary and secondary data collected. This method is particularly suited for qualitative research as it enables a systematic yet flexible approach to extracting meaningful insights from diverse data sources without relying on prior coding.

Nigeria in West African Politics

Nigeria's role in West African politics has been shaped by its economic strength, population size, and strategic location. Empirical studies (Oladimeji and Ahmad, 2022) consistently highlight Nigeria as a dominant force within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), often referred to as the regional hegemon. According to Adebajo (2020), Nigeria contributes the largest financial support to ECOWAS, accounting for approximately 40% of its budget. This financial commitment has enabled Nigeria to lead peacekeeping missions, mediate conflicts, and spearhead regional development initiatives. Data from ECOWAS records reveal Nigeria's key involvement in resolving political crises in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, where its leadership was pivotal in restoring stability.

Despite its influence, Nigeria's leadership in West Africa is not without challenges. Scholars such as Bach (2019) reveal that Nigeria's assertiveness has occasionally been met with resistance from smaller member states. For instance, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire have sometimes questioned Nigeria's motives, perceiving its dominance as self-serving rather than altruistic. Nigeria accounts for over 60% of West Africa's GDP and is the largest exporter of crude oil within the region (World Bank, 2022). This economic dominance has positioned Nigeria as a critical player in regional economic integration initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Common External Tariff and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). Nigeria's protectionist trade policies, such as border closures in 2019, have strained relations with neighboring states like Benin and Niger, highlighting the contradictions in its regional role.

Nigeria's role in regional security, particularly through its contributions to peacekeeping operations such as the Nigerian-led ECOMOG interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s are often cited as landmark examples of regional leadership in conflict resolution. Recent reports from the ECOWAS Monitoring Group show that Nigeria remains one of the largest troop contributors to peacekeeping missions in Mali and Guinea-Bissau. However, these efforts are constrained by Nigeria's own internal challenges, including insecurity and economic instability. Evidence underscores the duality of Nigeria's position as both a leader in West African politics and a state grappling with domestic vulnerabilities.

Nigeria's Leadership Role in ECOWAS

Nigeria's leadership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been a defining feature of its regional diplomacy since the organization's establishment in 1975. Evidence

highlights Nigeria's role as a financial backbone of ECOWAS, contributing approximately 70% of the organization's budget (Johnson, 2023). This financial commitment underpins Nigeria's influence in shaping ECOWAS policies and initiatives. For example, Nigeria has spearheaded regional integration programs such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET), aimed at enhancing trade and economic cooperation. According to Adebajo (2020), Nigeria's proactive economic policies within ECOWAS have significantly driven regional development. Nigeria's leadership is also evident in its active involvement in conflict resolution and peacekeeping missions. The creation and deployment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars underscore Nigeria's commitment to regional stability. Bach (2019) showed that Nigeria provided over 75% of troops and financial resources for ECOMOG operations, earning it recognition as a stabilizing force in West Africa. Furthermore, Nigeria's leadership in the mediation processes in Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia demonstrates its diplomatic clout and strategic interest in maintaining peace in the sub-region.

Despite these contributions, Nigeria's leadership has faced criticism, particularly regarding its ability to foster political unity among ECOWAS member states. Studies such as Adebajo (2020) and Eze, (2022) highlight instances where Nigeria's dominance has been perceived as overbearing by smaller member states, creating tensions within the bloc. For instance, Nigeria's push for the adoption of the ECO, a single West African currency, has faced resistance from Francophone countries that remain aligned with France. This divergence has slowed progress on regional monetary integration. Scholars like Eze (2022) argued that Nigeria's leadership should be more inclusive to accommodate the diverse interests within ECOWAS. Moreover, Nigeria's domestic challenges, including political instability, economic recession, and insecurity, have sometimes hindered its ability to lead effectively in ECOWAS. For example, Nigeria's reduced financial contributions during its 2016 economic downturn significantly impacted ECOWAS operations.

Nigeria's Economic and Military Influence in ECOWAS

Nigeria's leadership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is significantly shaped by its economic and military power, with the country being both the largest economy and one of the most militarily powerful members of the organization (Agbese, 2021). As the dominant economic force in the region, Nigeria's contributions to ECOWAS's development agenda are substantial. Nigeria's economic influence is primarily seen in its role as the largest contributor to the ECOWAS budget and its ability to drive regional economic policies. According to Agbese (2021), Nigeria has utilized its economic power to influence key regional initiatives, including the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) and the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET). This economic leadership has allowed Nigeria to steer the direction of regional trade and development, although this dominance has not been without challenges, particularly from smaller states that perceive Nigeria's economic might as a form of regional hegemony.

The military dimension of Nigeria's influence within ECOWAS is equally crucial. As a leading contributor to ECOWAS peacekeeping operations, particularly through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), Nigeria has been at the forefront of efforts to stabilize conflict zones in West Africa. Nigeria's military interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s are often cited as examples of its leadership in regional security. Olonisakin (2022) explains that Nigeria's military contributions have been central in shaping ECOWAS's security framework, especially in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Nigeria's role in these peacekeeping missions not only underscores its military strength but also its commitment to ensuring regional stability. However, as Adeoye (2023) points out, Nigeria's military interventions have sometimes sparked debates

about its motives, with critics arguing that the country uses its military power to advance its own political and strategic interests, often at the expense of smaller member states.

Despite Nigeria's crucial role in regional security, its military dominance in ECOWAS has led to occasional tension within the organization. Smaller states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in West Africa often express concerns over the centralization of power in Nigeria, which can sometimes undermine the collective decision-making process within ECOWAS (Obadare, 2024). According to Amara (2022), Nigeria's military leadership has raised questions about the balance of power within the regional organization, as its large military presence in peacekeeping missions can overshadow the contributions of smaller member states. Moreover, while Nigeria's military interventions have been essential in resolving conflicts, they have also highlighted the limitations of ECOWAS in ensuring long-term peace and stability without external support. This dynamic points to the complexities of Nigeria's role within ECOWAS, where its economic and military influence is both a source of leadership and a point of contention among member states. Nigeria's influence in ECOWAS cannot be fully understood without considering the internal political and economic challenges that affect its leadership in the organization. As Nwosu (2023) argue, while Nigeria's economic and military strength positions it as the leader of ECOWAS, its internal challenges, including political instability and economic inequality, have sometimes hindered its ability to fully leverage its power within the organization.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Nigeria's Economic and Military Power and Decision-making' Processes in ECOWAS.

ECOWAS decision-making is significantly shaped by Nigeria's economic and military strength. This position is validated through interviews conducted with members of academic community selected for the study. These expert views reinforce existing academic perspectives and provide additional insights into Nigeria's influence over ECOWAS affairs. Respondent from the Department of International Relations at OAU emphasized the weight of Nigeria's economic power within ECOWAS:

Nigeria's control over ECOWAS's financial framework is not accidental; it is strategic. When one country contributes over 70% of an organization's budget, it is naturally positioned to set the agenda. This is not just about financial power, but about translating that power into policy direction on trade, currency, and regional integration (Interview 29-04-2025).

This aligns with existing data that Nigeria contributes the largest share of ECOWAS's budget and underpins several flagship initiatives like the Lagos-Abidjan highway project (Adebajo, 2020). The power to fund translates into the power to prioritize, thus allowing Nigeria to align ECOWAS economic strategies with its national development interests. On the military front, Nigeria's strategic posture within ECOWAS security mechanisms was strongly affirmed by a respondent from the Department of History:

ECOWAS cannot act militarily without Nigeria's nod. This is because Nigeria's troops and logistics have been the spine of its military operations. This is not merely participation it is command and control. Other

states may have voices, but Nigeria has both voice and muscle (Interview 19-05-2025).

This quote reflects the long-standing pattern where Nigeria has provided the bulk of troops, funding, and leadership for ECOWAS peacekeeping missions, including the pivotal intervention in The Gambia in 2017 (Akinola, 2024). Nigeria's military dominance has translated into the ability to set the regional security agenda and influence decisions on intervention, peace enforcement, and counter-terrorism. Respondent from the Department of Political Science at OAU highlighted the tension between Nigeria's dominance and internal or external limitations:

Nigeria leads, but leadership is costly. Rising inflation, subsidy removals, and internal insecurity make it hard to continue funding ECOWAS at the same scale. Ghana and Senegal are watching, and external actors like France and China are penetrating the region's security space. Nigeria must now negotiate its leadership, not assume it. (Interview 19-05-2025).

This view underscores the growing challenge to Nigeria's unipolar dominance within ECOWAS. Domestically, economic instability highlighted by the floating of the naira and high inflation may reduce Nigeria's capacity to sustain its traditional leadership role (Eboh & Ujah, 2024). Externally, other states and actors are asserting influence, thereby altering the geopolitical dynamics within which ECOWAS operates. As West Africa's largest economy, with around 60% regional contribution to GDP and nearly half of ECOWAS's population (World Bank, 2023), Nigeria's strong economy gives it powerful influence within ECOWAS, especially in shaping the group's economic integration plans, foreign policy decisions, and financial contributions. Nigeria remains ECOWAS's largest financial contributor, often covering over 70% of the organization's annual budget (Oshewolo et al., 2022). Such financial dominance grants Nigeria control over financial appropriation and ensuring regional projects benefit its economic agenda. Nigeria, for example, has been a major funder for flagship regional infrastructure projects, such as the Lagos-Abidjan highway corridor, intended for facilitating commerce and economic integration within and around West Africa (Adebajo, 2020).

Nigeria's economic policy also affects ECOWAS's policy on foreign trade. The country's closure of its border back in 2019 as a measure against smuggling as well as a move toward encouraging local industry had far-reaching effects on regional trade. The closure of the border affected neighboring ECOWAS countries' value chains, prompting emergency negotiations within the bloc toward addressing economic integration as well as trade balances (Akinyemi, 2021). This is a reflection on how Nigeria's economic policy makes ECOWAS's foreign trade laws as well as foreign trade disputes. Similarly, Nigeria's opposition to the ECOWAS plan for a common currency, *eco*, has also dictated the pace at which monetary integration will occur at a regional level. While ECOWAS had proposed a common currency as a move toward economic integration, Nigeria's opposition against not phasing out the naira for fear against macroeconomic stability has stalled the initiative (Bach, 2019). Nigeria's opposition against *eco* is a reflection on its desire for economic sovereignty, a reflection on its ability to control the pace at which ECOWAS's monetary policy will move.

In addition to economic influence, Nigeria's military prowess is another key driver of ECOWAS's security policies. Being the most militarily developed country in West Africa, Nigeria has led

ECOWAS's peacekeeping and security efforts. The country's dominance in the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) is a testament to its ability to set regional security agendas. Since the 1990s, Nigeria has provided over 80% of the soldiers and funding for peacekeeping missions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau, effectively setting ECOWAS's security agenda (Aning & Dwumor, 2020). Nigeria's military dominance was again evident during the 2017 Gambian political crisis, when ECOWAS, under Nigeria's leadership, used military pressure through the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) to ensure a peaceful transition of power (Akinola, 2024). These interventions are a testament to Nigeria's status as the security guarantor of ECOWAS, which gives it the power to set the organization's conflict resolution strategies.

Nigeria's terrorism war has also influenced ECOWAS's regional security agenda. With ECOWAS's principal force combating Boko Haram and other terror groups in the Lake Chad Region, Nigeria has pushed for stronger regional anti-terrorism policies within ECOWAS. The endorsement of the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy was primarily driven by Nigeria's security agenda, an example of Nigeria's hegemony of regional security agendas (Bala & Tar, 2021). However, even though Nigeria's military interventions have played a key role in regional stabilization, it is argued that its security operations are carried out with an interest in promoting state interests rather than collective regional security. For instance, Nigeria's military interventions in conflict-prone regions have been viewed as a foreign policy extension rather than a neutral peacekeeping mission (Etemire & Igbinovia, 2021). Nigeria's internal security issues, including insurgencies and banditry, are also a concern about whether the nation can sustain regional military interventions while fighting internal threats (Obi, 2009).

Another vital area where Nigeria's military influence influences ECOWAS decision-making is defense cooperation and security policy-making. Nigeria has played a leading role in shaping the ECOWAS Standby Force, which is organized for rapid military interventions against crises within the region. The nation's aggressive push for military cooperation among ECOWAS members has promoted various regional security policy frameworks, including the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Kohnert, 2023). These policy frameworks have been pivotal in shaping ECOWAS's responses to politico-military instability and unconstitutional regime changes, for example, through military coups against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. Nigeria's tough approach towards allowing democratic rule into these countries has influenced ECOWAS's collective action, with sanctions and diplomate instruments being formulated for the restoration of political stability (Arinze et al., 2021).

In spite of Nigeria's dominance, there are challenges ensuring its dominance within ECOWAS. Other member state which include Ghana and Senegal, have been proactive in countering Nigeria's dominance through enhancing a deconcentrating decision-making structure within the organization. Ghana, in particular, has also emerged as a rival regional leader through having important ECOWAS organs as well as being deeply engaged with economic and security initiatives (Diarra, 2022). Growing involvement on the part of external actors, including France, the US, and China, with security issues of West Africa has introduced new dynamics that limit Nigeria's unipolar dominance over ECOWAS's security options (Kohnert, 2023). That aspect captures what Nigeria is facing with ensuring its leadership role within ECOWAS.

The integration of scholarly interviews with secondary data shows that Nigeria's influence on ECOWAS decision-making is both structural and strategic. Economically, Nigeria uses its budgetary dominance to shape development priorities and resist integration mechanisms that could undermine its macroeconomic sovereignty. Militarily, it dictates security responses across the region, from counter-terrorism to peacekeeping. Yet, this leadership is not without contention.

As she rightly notes, internal pressures and external competition pose serious tests to Nigeria's ability to continue as ECOWAS's uncontested leader. The country's future role in shaping regional integration will depend on its capacity to navigate these structural challenges while reinforcing its economic and military assets through strategic diplomacy and regional consensus-building.

The Militating Factors against Nigeria Leadership Role within ECOWAS

Findings from the field reveal that, Nigeria's long domestic security issues present a great impediment to its leadership in ECOWAS. According to a respondent from Obafemi Awolowo University, Department of International Relations he contends that Nigeria cannot provide regional military command when its territorial integrity is at stake. He noted that:

Nigeria's internal security preoccupations have significantly diminished its capacity to make a front-line military contribution in ECOWAS. You cannot command a region militarily when you're having trouble securing your own territory. Boko Haram, ISWAP, and banditry have outpaced our internal command bandwidth. (Interview,29-04-2025).

This perspective highlights the paradox internal security challenges at the heart of Nigeria's diminishing influence. The military is overstretched by domestic insurgencies and banditry that have persisted for over two decades, diverting attention, troops, and resources away from regional peacekeeping obligations. His words emphasize how Nigeria's preoccupation with internal crises has weakened its ability to project power and influence beyond its borders. This domestic security burden seriously questions among ECOWAS member states Nigeria's ability to provide leadership for collective security, as they fear that a nation experiencing such chronic internal uncertainty cannot be a reliable security provider. This argument resonates with wider scholarly propositions that internal vulnerability tends to undermine external legitimacy of leadership, especially within fragile regional security complexes.

The second primary constraint on Nigeria's leadership is founded upon military capability. In the words of a respondent in the Department of History O.A.U, though Nigeria boasts one of the largest defense budgets in the continent, its military potential has been diminished by systemic corruption and mismanagement. He stated that:

Military efficiency is not about spending the most; it's about maximizing that money in terms of strategic capacity. Nigeria keeps spending on defense, but corruption, poor logistics, and politicized buying have annihilated performance. (Interview,19-05-2025).

His indictment lays bare that budgetary allocations have not been translated to readiness for operations or sustainable peacekeeping capacity. Wastage and scandals have eroded procurement of equipment and logistics such that frontline forces are ill-equipped and funded during critical ECOWAS operations. This inefficiency has eroded trust among West African partners, and increasingly questioning Nigeria's ability to routinely deliver believable military interventions. This way, then, enables Nigeria's military capability weaknesses to feed into a self-reinforcing cycle: perceived instability motivates regional actors to seek alternative leadership and undermines Nigeria's regional bargaining leverage. From the regional geopolitical point of

view, the ECOWAS balance of military power is shifting. O.A.U respondent detects a clear shift in regional balance of power that erodes Nigeria's hegemonic security position: According to her:

There has been a strategic shift in the region. Ghana, Senegal, even Côte d'Ivoire have developed capacity and earned international support. Nigeria can no longer dictate terms single-handedly. ECOWAS is no longer a one-man show. (Interview,19-05-2025).

Her position reveals that Nigeria's hegemony is no longer unchallenged because other members of ECOWAS invest in the military as well, albeit sometimes with the help of extra-regional powers from Western nations. Rising military pluralization in ECOWAS means that regional security options become increasingly commonly shared or disputed, not exclusively determined by Nigeria. The change reduces Nigeria's dominance over regional military agendas and disperses the responsibility and authority to a broad range of actors. It testifies to a movement toward multilateralism and collective management of security in ECOWAS that challenges the traditional ideology of Nigerian hegemony. Nigeria's leadership problem in ECOWAS is not simply a question of material military power but also of political credibility and moral legitimacy. O.A.U Department of Political Science respondent underscores that Nigeria's weak political will, internal governance defects, and human rights atrocities have eroded its regional credibility. He opined that:

Nigeria's leadership crisis in ECOWAS is also a moral and diplomatic one. Human rights concerns, regime hypocrisy, and bad diplomacy have accumulated surpluses of distrust. You can't lead effectively if your neighbour suspects your motives or your tactics. (Interview,15-05-2025).

His observation underscores the fact that Nigeria's own internal political uncertainty and allegations of army human rights abuses have undermined its credibility as a regional leader. Recurring policy reversals among governments create a void of steady commitment to ECOWAS security efforts, with extrajudicial killings and abuses during counter-insurgency operations tainting Nigeria's moral leadership. Leadership in terms of modern regional security is as much about legitimacy, trust, and shared values as it is about armed strength. Nigeria's failure to maintain a principled, transparent, and consistent position weakens its leadership and gives other ECOWAS countries leverage to insist on more decentralization and accountability in the regional security mechanism.

The data from the field point to a multidimensional weakening of Nigeria's leadership role in ECOWAS. Insecurity within attracts resources and energy, and corruption and logistics failures undermine military effectiveness. The emergence of other regional security actors, aided by external powers, erodes Nigeria's monopoly. Concurrently, diplomatic inconsistencies and moral scandals further erode the confidence of ECOWAS members in their ranks. Unless Nigeria embarks on profound reforms to stem these internal and external pressures, its decades-long dominance in West African security will remain in decline and pave the way for a pluralized and decentralized regional order.

On balance, the evidence is that while Nigeria remains a major military power in ECOWAS, a number of factors have circumscribed its ability to maintain sole leadership. Internal security

concerns, resource constraints, operational inefficiencies, shifting regional power dynamics, pressure from outside, as well as political inconsistency, all have contributed to the erosion of Nigeria's military primacy in ECOWAS. As a result, the West African security system has been decentralized, with other member countries of ECOWAS and external actors having larger roles in shaping West African security policies. These results emphasize the need for Nigeria to re-evaluate its war strategy, enhance regional alliances, and address internal issues in order to remain dominant in ECOWAS.

The findings further suggest that Nigeria's military engagement in ECOWAS has been hampered by growing regional resistance to unilateral interventions. Several West African states have increasingly demanded more collective decision-making in ECOWAS security affairs, moving away from the historical procedure of Nigeria leading regional interventions (Borzel & Risse, 2012). This shift reflects a broader trend of regional states seeking to assert their sovereignty and reduce dependency on Nigeria's military leadership. The increasing preference for multilateralism over unilateral interventions has limited Nigeria's ability to dictate ECOWAS military strategies, further eroding its dominance in the regional security landscape (Bouchouari, 2024).

Nigeria's Leadership Role within ECOWAS and Regional Stability, and Development in West Africa

Nigeria has been in the lead in employing military and diplomatic efforts at stabilizing unstable states in the region throughout the years. Most notable was Nigeria's leading role in ECOWAS interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the two nations' civil wars, deploying troops under the banner of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to restore stability and prevent further instability (Adebajo, 2002). The country played a leading role in the formation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which focused on the removal of trade restrictions and the free movement of goods and services among member states (Adetula, 2014). Nigeria has also backed ECOWAS development plans by funding major infrastructural projects and paying huge contributions to the ECOWAS budget. However, Nigeria's economic dominance has also been problematic, as its protectionist policies, such as periodic closure of borders, have created tensions with other countries in the region (Ogbonna & Onwuka, 2020). These policies have at times conflicted with ECOWAS's broader economic integration aspirations, making regional trade agreements less effective. Despite Nigeria's contributions, internal issues in Nigeria have at times weakened ECOWAS's ability to achieve sustainable development in West Africa. Nigeria's current security issues like insurgency in the northeast, banditry, and intercommunal clashes have diverted attention and resources away from regional development projects (Oshewolo et al., 2023).

One of the respondents for the study gave well-informed opinions regarding Nigeria's leadership role in ECOWAS and how it affects regional stability and West African regional growth. He contended that, Nigeria's leadership role in peacekeeping and peace-building was remarkable, noting that Nigeria had greatly contributed to regional stabilization through peacekeeping interventions and diplomacy. In his words:

Nigeria's long commitment to regional peacekeeping, as seen through Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia, demonstrates resolve to lead ECOWAS in keeping crises that could otherwise acquire uncontrollable proportions in check. (Interview, 29-04-2025).

His statement corroborates Nigeria as the leader in averting the escalation of conflicts and taking peaceful steps toward regional stability. Respondent from the Department of History, on his part, offers a cautious view that leadership in Nigeria is effective but constrained by internal factors. He maintained that:

Despite Nigeria being in the forefront of promoting economic integration and peace, its internal problems and protectionist policies sometimes take away from the regional growth agenda as a whole. (Interview,19-05-2025).

This is an expression of an existential tension for Nigeria as regional leader and state grappling with its own internal weaknesses. Random closure and opening of borders and unofficial, uncharted economic policies have, in his view, damaged neighbouring countries and hindered the unfettered implementation of ECOWAS trade conventions. His statement expresses the subtle fact that Nigeria's premier economic role, besides being a plus, is as tension-ridden and is periodically undermined by the ability to create regional harmony. Adding an aspect of security, a Professor from the Department of Political Science, articulates the constraints Nigeria has to perform effective leadership in regional security coordination. He contended that:

Nigeria has had an excellent record in building regional defense agreements and intelligence-sharing networks, but the ongoing, decades-long insurgency in its northeast and other internal vulnerabilities compromise their effectiveness and credibility. (Interview,15-05-2025).

This report represents Nigeria's dilemma: although it is West Africa's leading regional security provider, ongoing internal insurgencies such as Boko Haram and ISWAP reinforce skepticism that it can lead effective anti-terrorism campaigns in ECOWAS's name. Her assessment is supported by ECOWAS's increasing reliance on extra regional players for protection, reflecting indirectly the international community no longer giving sole Nigerian regional hegemony over regional security concerns.

These data, complement the overall assessment of Nigeria's leadership in ECOWAS. Nigeria's historical interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia confirm it as a stabilizer that prevents localized crises from spreading to the region as a whole. Peacekeeping leadership has undoubtedly contributed positively to regional stability. Moreover, Nigeria's experience in propelling regional economic programs such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) is proof of the determination to kindle integration and intra-regional trade crucial to long-term progress. Nigeria's internal ailments, such as closure by protectionist pressures, shifting security crises, and economic instability, are, however, likely to cut off full realization of these regional ambitions. Such internal issues bleed capital and political energies, which detract from Nigeria's ability to pursue long-term development programs and debilitate its moral credibility to advocate for democracy and human rights across ECOWAS.

Although Nigeria remains heavyweight and first among equals in ECOWAS, problems emanating from its own domestic situation and the emerging regional dynamics have somewhat attenuated its efficacy. Country-level leadership towards peace and integration has been decisive, yet is beset by contradictions that reduce its ability to deliver stability and progress to their full potential. More involvement by other regional and extra regional players in security and economic

partnership implies more multilateralism for ECOWAS, with leadership by Nigeria, though still core, to be balanced more by collective responsibility and shared leadership.

Conclusion

In accordance with the findings of the research, which was specifically concerned with Nigeria's economic and military influence in the decision-making of ECOWAS, it is apt to assert that Nigeria is at the heart of regional policy making, security arrangements, and economic forces. As the largest economy in West Africa and a prime financier of ECOWAS, Nigeria exercises great leverage over the trajectory of the organization. But its leadership usually receives mixed response from other members, who sometimes perceive its hegemony as domineering. While Nigeria's economic contribution has enhanced ECOWAS's capacity to promote trade, infrastructure development, and regional integration, internal economic instability and governance issues at times detract from its achievement. In addition, Nigerian military contributions to ECOWAS peacekeeping missions have enhanced its leadership credentials, but internal security challenges such as insurgency, terrorism, and resource constraints at times limited its ability to sustain regional security initiatives. Despite being strong, Nigeria's leadership of ECOWAS is plagued by structural and political limitations that require strategic rebalancing.

The power of the country, while great, is not total since smaller countries still continue to pursue their interests, sometimes in contravention of Nigeria's dominance. The study suggests that if Nigeria is to continue and better its leadership position, it ought to address internal economic and security challenges, enhance regional solidarity, and be more participatory in ECOWAS decision-making. A more just leadership style one that focuses more on coordination than individual dominance will enhance ECOWAS's overall effectiveness and make Nigeria's contribution constructive, not adversarial. Nigeria's achievement in holding leadership will finally depend on its capacity to reconcile national interests with regional priorities, ensuring long-term stability and development in West Africa.

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